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An Address by

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THOMAS WHITTAKER,  
2 & 3 BIBLE HOUSE.

4 Sept. 1915 1881

## AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL MACHINES.

[Delivered at the Church Congress, Pittsfield, Mass., in June, 1898.]

It matters not in what terms the question before us is stated, nor how it may become clouded in debate. Back of the terms, behind the clouds, there is a simple issue, on one side or the other of which men must range themselves. In form, we are discussing politics; in fact, morals.

We hear it said that religion is religion, business is business, politics are politics. In that shallow utterance it is assumed that in business and politics men may do or permit things which religion forbids. It is really a pitiful play upon words, although we all make use of it, to say of a shifty politician that he is personally honest. There is no such differentiation as a religious conscience, a business conscience, a political conscience. Any man who does or applauds the doing in politics of that which will not bear the light of day is, in essence, a dishonest man. He should be sent to Coventry as such, however respectable he may be as director of a corporation or warden of a Church.

The vital question for us here is, not what ought to be the attitude of politicians in respect of integrity, but what ought to be our attitude towards politicians. Our parties are, and will continue to be, managed by them. We are marshalled under their command, and are expected to vote for candidates whom they select. When they lie and cheat and steal, ostensibly for the sake of the party, really for themselves, we are told to keep silent for the sake of that self same party, and continue our support. Shall we do it? Deceive ourselves as we may, there is the issue. Thus stated, there is but one answer to make. Double standards are no more admissible in morals than in finance. It is better to lose a good cause in an election than to win it by fraud. It is better to have a just bill defeated in the legislature than to procure its passage by bribery. It is better to fail of an appointment to office than to obtain it by a bargain with a boss.

A discussion of these things in a Church Congress is timely. It is whispered that the reverend gentleman who follows me is to speak in behalf of the "machine." As a teacher of morality, it is of course distasteful to him to champion those who practice fraud. As one who does not believe in the divine right of kings or of bishops, he must secretly smile at his contending

for the divine right of the boss. We must bear in mind, however, that this is an academic debate, and that his role is merely that of *Advocatus Diaboli*. As such he will have an easy task. To pick laws in reformers, and show that they are not entitled to the honors of sainthood, is an argument ready at hand. Those persons whose knowledge is not based on a practical acquaintance with politics often use it. Such men are not aware of the fact that under present conditions no one can become a boss without having been a scamp. The trouble with the amateur advocate of the devil is that when he has established the proposition, as he soon can, that the opponents of the machine are sadly imperfect, that they usually fail because their talents are destructive rather than constructive, he adds to his role that of advocacy for the devil. He advances to affirmative support of the boss, and by a queer kind of logic. You will always find such an apologist resting on a *non sequitur*. Because the reformer is full of faults, the professional politician should be soundly followed as if he were faultless!

It is not my purpose to defend reformers or to assail politicians. We can as easily dispense with doctors to cure our bodies, lawyers to defend our property, priests to minister to our souls, as with politicians to handle our politics. On the other hand, there is constant need for earnest men, who, without care for the consequences to their party or to themselves, will fight fraud and stand for the right. Notwithstanding all his merits, the politician's ends are usually selfish. Notwithstanding all his faults, the reformer's ends are in the main unselfish. Both are necessary for political progress. As has been said of right and wrong—

"Between their endless jar justice resides."

The problem is, how to keep the centripetal force of self-love and the centrifugal force of altruism in due equilibrium. Solve it, and the social sphere will move as steadily through time as the earth through space.

Nor is it my intention to dilate upon the evil results of meek acquiescence in party fraud and chicanery. They are known of all men. It is not a question as to which machine is the worse. Both are equally bad in every large city. Given two propositions, the one that the manipulation of our political affairs must always be in the hands of professional politicians; the other, that we must never vote against our party, and corrupt boss rule is sure to follow. Government, whether national, state or municipal, must be administered by a party. A party in time falls under the control of a clique, *alias* machine. The machine is run by henchmen. The henchmen begin by following a leader and end by obeying a boss. That lovely product of our boasted American institutions demands as servile obedience as did the king whom our forefathers overthrew. He is a prince under a plebeian name. To dispute his will is treason, the punishment for which is decapitation.

Let us rather direct our thoughts to the important question which stares all liberty-loving Americans in the face. What are we to do to be saved? On the one hand we are told, not only by those who love to call themselves practical politicians, but by those who preach allegiance to them in spite of their fraudulent methods, that parties are necessary; and, being necessary, there must be thorough party organization. When we have admitted that, as admit it we must, the conclusion is triumphantly thrust upon us that, if practical results are to be attained, we must work with rather than against our party organization, gracefully submitting to the will of the majority and quietly winking at fraud which we cannot prevent. On the other hand we are told, by sincere reformers, that the party machines in the great cities have passed under the control of corrupt bosses, and that there is no way to get rid of the boss except by smashing his machine. When we have admitted that, as admit we must, the conclusion is with equal triumph thrust upon us, that if we want pure politics we must not have any party organization at all, but trust to the people and their sense of right and wrong. We must live on enthusiasm and work on patriotism. Here is the eternal play between those forces, self-love and altruism. On which shall we rely? My answer is, on neither at the expense of the other; on both, in due combination.

Let us discard at once all plans which, like those of socialistic dreamers, require to be carried out by perfect beings. When human nature becomes dehumanized, it will need neither church nor state nor party. Till then no working scheme can be devised in theology or statecraft which does not appeal to love of one's self as well as love of one's neighbor. There is, indeed, duty to self as well as to others. In any endeavor to get rid of bosses, our feet should be guided by the lamp of experience. In urging what I am about to say I shall part company with those opponents of the machine, who would destroy it by reliance on the God of battles, without taking pains to keep the powder dry or the soldiers drilled. Let all who favor political protoplasm remember that protoplasm is nothing worth unless it develops into organism. A fitting preface to my plea is the striking parallel between the evolution of the pope of the sixteenth century and the boss of the nineteenth.

A powerful impulse of devotion to principle animated alike the fishermen who revolted against the Jewish theocracy in Palestine and the farmers who overthrew the British aristocracy in America. For a while in each rebellion holy zeal supplied the want of organization. The first assemblage of the Christian Church was but a primary, where the disciples gathered to select, not an officer to rule a body, but a witness to testify of facts. Those simple-minded folk fancied that if they spread the knowledge of the Gospel with singleness of heart, had all things in common, distributed to every one according to his need, this would be enough to insure the acceptance of their doctrine, the preservation of their spiritual liberties until the not-distant return

of their crucified Lord. With equal simplicity our forefathers took it for granted that, pending the coming of the political millennium which republicanism would surely bring, primary gatherings of citizens inspired by the love of political liberty would suffice to supply the motive power for administering the new government. In each case altruism was soon brought face to face with self-love. In both the occasion was the same. It is, indeed, significant that the first quarrel in the Christian Church was over spoils. When the number of disciples multiplied, "there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations." Those who were acting as witnesses for the faith, occupied in prayer and ministry of the word, could not spare time for such business, and the people elected special officials for the purpose. The ecclesiastical protoplasm began to take organic shape. As the eye-witnesses to the faith who had been the natural leaders died off, overseers to take their places became necessary. The episcopacy was developed. Then followed a primus; lastly, a pope. Is it not a lesson for us to digest that the organization of the Church-militant, which began in the refusal of St. Peter to serve tables, ended by his alleged successor becoming the corrupt dispenser of ecclesiastical rewards? Are we to wonder at the development of our political machines? I shall not stop to trace step by step the processes by which, out of the primary, has been evolved the boss.

"Thus everything includes itself in power—  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded by will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself."

Now, what was done by the reformers of the sixteenth century? When they found that they could effect nothing from within they went without. Where they could not get control of the local church organization, they formed a new one. The pope was relegated to his proper sphere as the head of one of a number of churches, all of which are kept within bounds by that which is also the life of trade-competition. Thus the lamp sheds its light along a path which leads to constructive work of associated effort under the guidance of experienced men.

The work of re-forming the political machines, in New York at least, has passed through the first stage and reached the second. The destructive part was begun in 1884, in the Republican party, by what is known as the Mugwump movement, and was finished in 1896 in the Democratic party by the Gold revolt. The needed lesson has at last been learned in both, that the cry, "Never vote against your party," is the devil's cry. Having advanced to the knowledge that the question of opposing one's party is merely one of times and seasons, the individual responsibility is brought home to every

man. Surely the time has come for every honest man to take up arms against his local party organization, when its active members have surrendered their God-given manhood into the keeping of a boss, who dispenses political patronage as corruptly as ever did the pope ecclesiastical patronage in bygone centuries. This position is now receiving general recognition in most of our cities. Constructive work is, therefore, next in order.

Let me reach my conclusion by the aid of that well-worn metaphor, the machine. A manufacturer who, after vainly trying to improve the product of his factory by changing his employees, finds that the cause of his poor output is a worn-out or antiquated machine, is a foolish manufacturer who does not throw it away and get a new one. The analogy is obvious. The primary in our cities is a mistake. It is an effete institution. Experience shows that the people will not attend it. A political machine built upon that principle is sure to fall in to the control of bosses and henchmen. The time has come to get rid of it. Let the boss keep it if he will. It is just what he wants. Let us construct new machinery, built on right principles, taking into our service such few of the old employees as may be honest, and under their guidance train up as many new workers as are needed. In proportion as organization is thorough, systematic, sustained, administered by capable men, it is successful. Without it no social, military, ecclesiastical or political movement can produce permanent results. It is necessary to fan the spark, to feed the flame, to direct the power thereby engendered. A sufficient number of altruistic men, with time at their disposal, cannot be found to administer it. They must be supplemented by men who have worthy ambitions to serve their country in office; also by paid men. To avoid the corruption which has overtaken the machines, the payments should be out of private contributions rather than the public purse.

If it be charged that the new organization will in time be found wanting, my answer is, confession and avoidance. Imperfect men cannot make a perfect machine. It is for the future to rectify what the future develops. Our responsibility is simply to shape the new instrument as best we can, with an eye to the mischiefs of the old. Those mischiefs are loss of manhood, impairment of honor, rewards given to the undeserving; last and most serious of all, the supremacy of the boss through corruption and blackmail.

In presenting to you this plan, I am simply giving the outlines of the Citizens' Union which is already taking form in New York. It rests upon four cardinal principles, which may be called Municipal Effort, Civil-service Reform, Non-partisanship, Free Nominations. Let me describe each.

(1) Municipal Effort:

As it is in the city that the evil effects of boss-ruled parties is mainly felt and more easily attacked, the Citizens' Union is confined to municipal issues.

(2) Civil-service Reform:

As it is the spoils system that has produced the boss, the Citizens' Union

addres patronage as a means of obtaining power, and insists on a civil-service wherein merit, ascertained by competitive examination, shall be the qualification for appointive office rather than influence obtained by fawning service to the boss.

(3) Non-partisanship:

As national party issues have no place in city affairs, its candidates for elective offices are selected from either national party, with a view to fitness for the position rather than to national party affiliations.

(4) Free Nominations:

As the primary is no longer attended by the people at large, and delegates to nominating conventions chosen at primaries are mainly dummies selected by the boss, its nominations are made by popular petition.

The phrase "non-partisanship" is not a happy one, because it is often taken to mean that we do not believe in parties. The contrary is the fact. Most of our members belong to one or other of the national parties; but we agree in thinking that those parties are trespassers on the municipal domain, and we purpose to eject them and confine them to their own territory. We are trying to build up a thoroughly organized municipal party, in which disinterested reformers and such experienced politicians as are honest shall work in harmony for the permanent good government of the city in the interests of all its citizens, and without regard to the effect on their respective national parties. We believe that good government, like charity, begins at home. Although defeated last fall, our fight yielded some lasting results. Time will permit mention of only two. The hypocrisy of the Republican party organization, in having theretofore pretended that it favored non-partisanship in municipal affairs, was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. The hypocrisy of Tammany, in claiming to belong to the Democratic party, was made clear as the noonday sun. When these fraudulent pretences, now established, become generally understood, the Citizens' Union may hope to win a municipal election. Meanwhile it is carrying on a ceaseless campaign of education and perfecting its party organization. It is no small task to overthrow two powerful bosses who are in corrupt alliance. We may be puny Davids; but we possess the stone of truth, and we are making the sling. The day will come when the Goliath in each camp of the Philistines will be struck with deadly force.

In that city where Washington first served as President, in the park named for him, upon the arch erected to him, memorable words of his greet the uplifted eye. They shall be a perpetual inspiration to her citizens. They are peculiarly pertinent to her situation, for they point out the work to be done, they mark its limitation, and they join together what her politicians have put asunder:

"Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God."



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